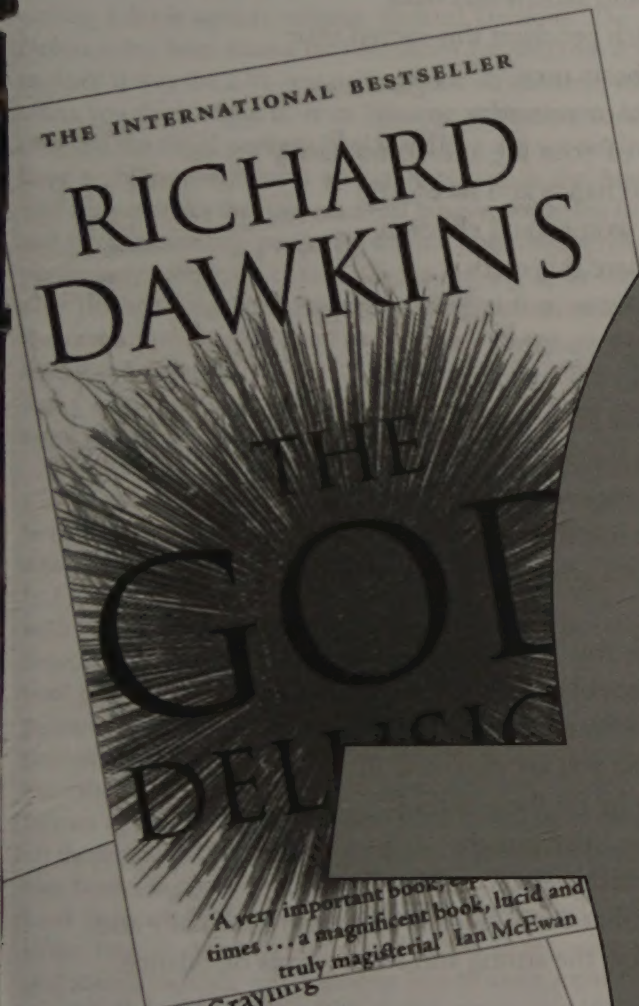


# The INQUIRER

65p

the voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7702 July 12 2008

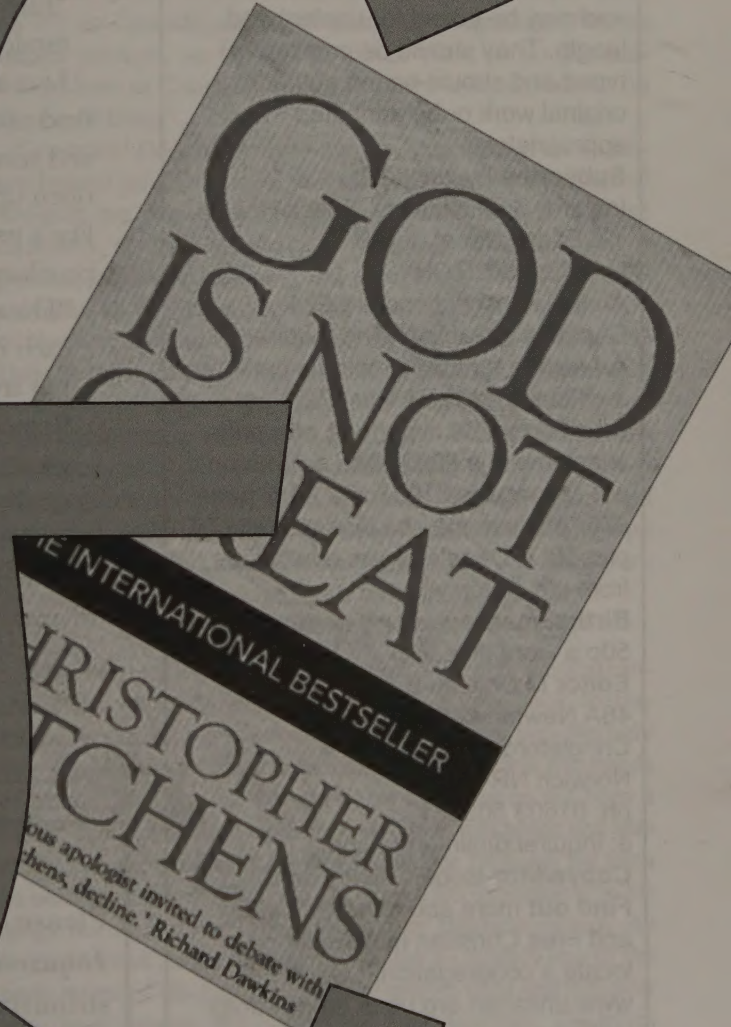
## ash faith, bank a million




'A very important book, especially in these times... a magnificent book, lucid and truly magisterial' Ian McEwan  
A C Grayling

**AGAINST  
ALL GODS**

Six Polemics on Religion  
and an Essay on Kindness



'Hitchens, a brilliant and courageous apologist invited to debate with the world's leading religious leaders, declines.' Richard Dawkins

Oberon  Masters

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# The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest

Nonconformist religious newspaper

**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the  
General Assembly of the Unitarian and  
Free Christian Churches 2001*

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## Inquiring Words

**Love the gift of your life and do no harm**

Let the sky above me unroll like a scroll,  
and let me read upon it today's text for my life:

"You are alive, here and now.

Love boldly and always tell the truth."

Let the wind arrange the naked branches  
of the maples and aspens and oaks  
into letters which proclaim this sacred text:

"Your heart beats now,  
not tomorrow or yesterday.

Love the gift of your life and do no harm."

Let the eyes and hands and faces  
of all men and women and children  
with whom I share this earth  
be chapter and verse in this great scripture text:

"Life is struggle and loss, and also  
tenderness and joy.

Live all of your life, not just part of it."

And now let all the poems and scriptures and novels and films  
and songs and cries and lullabies and prayers and anthems  
open up before our free hearts. Let them open like a torah,  
like a psalm, like a gospel, like an apocalypse and let them  
proclaim:

"Do not think you can take away  
each other's troubles,  
but try to be with each other in them.  
Remember that you are part, not all,  
great, but not by far the greatest,  
small, precious brief breaths  
in the great whirlwind of creation."

And remember that every single human word is finally and  
divinely cradled in the strong and secure arms of Silence.

— Mark Belletini

*From Sonata for Voice and Silence: Meditations  
published by Skinner House Books, 2008*

## Faith in Words

Please contribute to the August double issue of *The Inquirer*. Meditations, prayers and sermons may be submitted by e-mail or post, or on the new *Inquirer* website at <http://www.inquirer.org.uk/> Click on 'Send an Article'. E-mail and postal addresses listed on the left of this page. Or, if you have heard something at a service which inspired you, encourage the worship leader to contribute.

**Submissions due 20 July**



# Make your next million: Attack belief

Some authors have made their fortunes recently by attacking God and religion. **Bill Darlison** offers advice on how to write your own moneyspinner.

There's undoubtedly a great deal of money to be made by writing a book against religion. Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* has been among the best sellers for well over a year; in April it was the 27th best-selling book on Amazon, which, when you think about it, is an amazing achievement. Ahead of it are the usual cookery books and popular novels, but to have a philosophical work so highly placed on the Amazon lists demonstrates that there is a real hunger among the British and the Irish reading public for serious works about religion, particularly iconoclastic ones. *God is not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens, *Against all Gods*, by AC Grayling, and Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* are selling well too; so well, in fact, that I thought that today I would give you a few tips so that you can get your snout in the trough and make a little money yourself.

However, there is one major problem. We Unitarians have a lot in common with those who vent their spleen on conventional religion, and as I was reading through Dawkins' book and re-reading Hitchens' book, I was struck – a little reluctantly I must admit – by the number of times I felt I had to agree with them. Both authors are strongly critical of the religious indoctrination of the young, both reject the idea of 'revelation' (obviously), and both lament the way in which religion's metaphysical claims, which, by their very nature, cannot be proved, have been – and still are – barriers to the acceptance of the rational and evidence-based conclusions of science. Unitarians would generally find themselves in the same camp on all these matters, so there is, no doubt, a great deal that these two books can teach us, and I would recommend Hitchens' book particularly. Hitchens is one of the foremost journalists in the English-speaking world, and he has an engaging, witty and accessible style which enables him to make sophisticated arguments in beautiful and intelligible prose. In addition, he doesn't feel he has to be objective. His book is a polemic – an attack – and he is not afraid to sprinkle his paragraphs with highly entertaining, if, at times, excessive, put-downs.

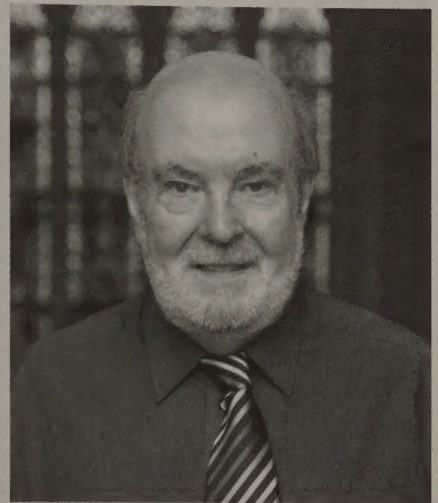
So this is lesson one in our course on writing a profitable anti-religious book: do not strive to be fair. There's no need. We are living in a time when religion is on the back foot, struggling to maintain any vestiges of credibility. Few people among the 'chattering classes' are going to admonish you for your lack of objectivity. Certainly no *Guardian* columnist will. The intellectual climate is on your side; religion has become something to sneer at, so sneer away.

## Condescend

In addition, try to cultivate an air of cultural superiority, showing how religion is primitive, and comes, in Hitchens's fine phrase, 'from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species' (page 64), but how you are now part of the grown-up portion of the human race. Exhibit, even when you deny you are exhibiting, what EP Thompson calls 'the enormous condescen-

sion of posterity', that is the wonderful benefits of hindsight which enable you to look down on the people of the past and to belittle their efforts at understanding.

Next, don't be afraid to blame religion for things in which it may have played a part, but which it certainly hasn't caused. A world without reli-



Bill Darlison

gion, says Richard Dawkins, would be a world with no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, ... no persecution of Jews as Christ-killers, no Northern Ireland troubles, no 'honour killings' ...<sup>1</sup>.

Goodness! Does he really think, for example, that the Northern Ireland troubles were – and are still – just about religion? Religion has played its part, but has Dawkins so little sense of history, so little knowledge of sociology, of economics, of politics, of human nature – and particularly the psychological make up of young men – that he can lay the last 40 years of Northern Ireland violence squarely at the door of religion? Does he think that the average member of the Provisional IRA gave two hoots about the veneration of the Virgin Mary and transubstantiation, or that the Red Hand Defenders believed that unless one had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ one couldn't be saved? Such ideas are preposterous – and Dawkins knows it, or else he is incredibly naïve. His paragraph is rhetoric – unfair, biased and myopic; which, of course, are the very charges he levels against religion.

## Blame faith for every ill

However, once you've made your wild and unsubstantiated claim, you can spend a good deal of your book analysing these various world 'trouble spots', showing how the ugly face of religion has been responsible for countless thousands of deaths, implying all the while that had religion not been a factor, everyone would have been able to live in peace and harmony. Maybe Professor Dawkins could be forgiven for such an outrageous intellectual gaffe, because his expertise is in biology not in sociology, but Christopher Hitchens cannot. As an ex-Marxist, he cannot have forgotten so quickly one of the basic tenets of his former faith: that people fight and kill over jobs, land, money, and power, not over doctrines. Doctrines are among the weapons employed, but they are not the cause of the conflict.

And while you're in the business of setting up 'straw men' – easy targets for you to demolish – have a cursory read through the Bible and pick out a few choice bits which seem to show

<sup>1</sup> From the Preface

(Continued on next page)



# Criticism vs critical thinking

(Continued from previous page)

God or Jesus in a bad light. And make sure when you do this that you take everything literally; don't allow for any scholarly or liberal interpretation; don't make any concessions for the time your chosen passages were written or for the style in which they were written. Take them absolutely at face value, just as do the fundamentalists whose ideas you attack with such vehemence. And don't worry about getting your terminology wrong or about making elementary blunders. So what if, like Hitchens, you think that the word 'synoptic' is a synonym for 'canonical'. These things don't matter. Only a few people will realise that you don't know what you are talking about.

## Be simplistic

In order to ensure that you don't get lost in the multitudinous ramifications of religious activity, make sure that you keep your definition of religion simple. Restrict your analysis to religious ideas, creeds, metaphysics, all of which form part of the religious experience, but which do not exhaust it. In fact, it would be a good idea not to delve too deeply into the way people actually live their religion, by considering how the average believer understands the creeds and doctrines and applies them to her life. Mention the strident anti-abortion fanatics, and the anti-homosexual bigots, but don't say anything about how millions of ordinary believers 'will daily be giving some thought to their souls through prayer, meditation, Bible-reading and the like, activities which reach into the depths of the soul where the switches are thrown between kindness and cruelty, hope and despair'<sup>2</sup>. This would be far too lengthy a process, and would require much more sophisticated analysis than you have time or patience for. The less you know about religion the better. Professor Terry Eagleton, who, as far as I am aware, is himself no friend of conventional religion, says that Richard Dawkins has written a book about religion when he knows virtually nothing about it. 'It's like someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject comes from *The Book of British Birds*', says Eagleton.

But don't let criticisms like this put you off. Not everybody can be an expert on biology, but, as we all know, anyone can appear to be an expert on religion.

## Ignore women

This leads us to what I consider to be the most important ingredient in your book: make sure that you don't include very much about women. Religion, as Dawkins and Hitchens understand it, is about men arguing and fighting over doctrines, so it is a good idea to disregard the female experience. It is a strange fact – one that both our authors ignore – that while almost all religion is controlled by men, its main practitioners are women. Just like nursing and primary school teaching: women do them, but men are generally in charge.

Christopher Hitchens has another book on the go at the moment: *The Portable Atheist*, and a very useful and interesting book it is too. It contains 47 contributions, but only three are by women, and one of those is George Eliot who, while certainly not a believer, was not a militant atheist either. In fact, she was associated for a while with the Unitarians in Shrewsbury. Judging by all these tomes, women have played very little part

in the anti-religious movement down the centuries. This is not to imply that women can't be atheists; it's just that they don't seem to have had the desire to shout too loudly about it.

Women approach religion differently from men. This is a deliberate generalisation, but it's not without substance. Doctrines are not that important to women, and fighting over them is certainly not important. Women come to religion in search of community, of belonging. They are impelled by those aspects of their experience that reason and logic can't make anything of, the feeling that they are part of something bigger than themselves and that they are connected to this 'something' and to the world in subtle and mysterious ways. Women are more open to the numinous, and are less likely than men to dismiss so-called 'paranormal' experiences as irrational and delusory. Women are acutely aware that you can't say to your child 'evolution loves you', <sup>iii</sup> because the story 'stinks of extinction', and has no power, in itself, to explain those feelings of love, tenderness, and belonging that are undoubtedly part of our make-up, and undoubtedly necessary for our sanity.

So, if you are going to write your anti-religion book, it would be advantageous to be a man. What's more, it's probably a good idea for you to be born under the zodiac sign of Aries – the sign of the pugnacious crusader. All four leading figures in the current group of anti-God campaigners were born in late March or early April: Richard Dawkins on 26th March; his American counterpart, Daniel Dennett on 28th March, AC Grayling, author of *Against all Gods*, on 3rd April, and Christopher Hitchens on 13th April. Now the female mind might be tempted – as I am tempted – to consider that this strange fact might have some significance, but the male attitude is to say that it is statistically meaningless, and to push it out of sight into a big box labelled 'coincidence', which has been specially constructed to accommodate every anomalous fact which offends against the materialist premise upon which their whole intellectual edifice is built.

## Deny your dogma

Which brings us to another stance you will have to take throughout your work: you will have to claim that your system of thought doesn't have dogmas, but is based entirely on rational and empirical deductions from observable facts. This is the biggest con of all, because Materialism, i.e. the doctrine that the material universe is all that exists, and its corollary, Epiphenomenalism, which holds that consciousness is a by-product of matter, are cornerstones of the whole philosophy, and are unwarranted assumptions, as much religious dogmas as anything emanating from the Vatican.

There was an episode of the television show *Father Ted* in which three bishops come to Craggy Island to elevate the Holy Stone of Clonrick to a grade-two relic. At the end of the episode, Father Dougal is asked by one of the bishops, 'Are you having any trouble with your faith, Father?' Dougal replies, 'You know that stuff about God creating the world in six days, and his son Jesus coming to earth to die for our sins and after three days rising from the dead?' 'Yes,' says the bishop. 'Well, that's the bit I'm having trouble with!' says Dougal. I feel the same about the dogmas of Materialism. 'You know that bit

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Huston, (2001), *Why Religion Matters*, Harper San Francisco, page 115

<sup>3</sup> Dunn, Stephen, *At the Smithville Methodist Church*

(Continued on next page)



# Honouring objectors' sacrifices

By Joy Croft

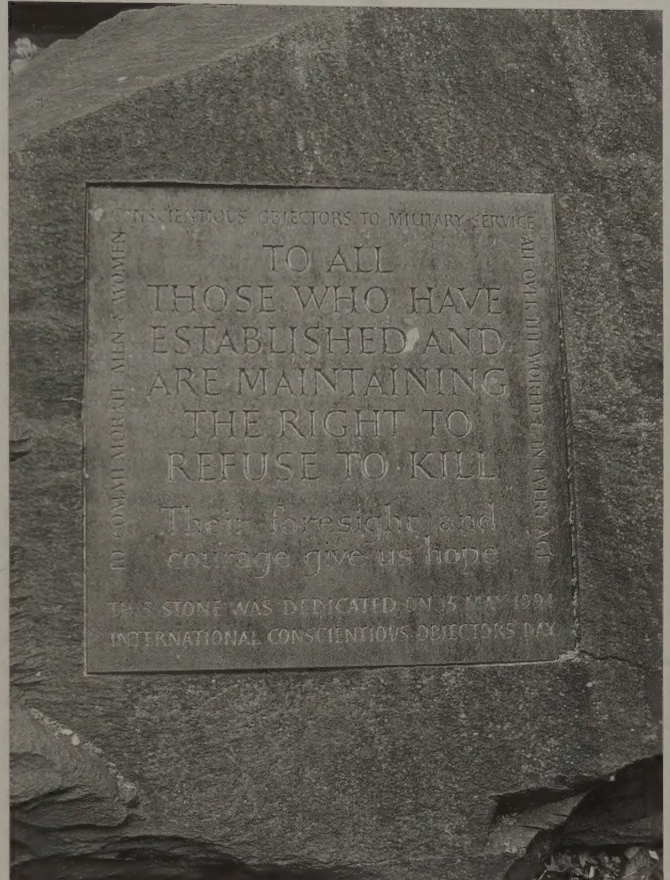
There are many ways to show courage. To give full credit to the human spirit, pacifists like us need to acknowledge the real courage and self-sacrifice soldiers sometimes show. And should not society as a whole honour those brave enough to refuse to fight when countries go to war and all the moral pressure is for joining in? Their courage points the way to the peaceful world we all wish for.

In the 1980s, Edna Mathieson, whose uncle had been an "absolutist" objector in the first World War (i.e. one who would take no part whatsoever) began campaigning for a national memorial in London for conscientious objectors (COs). Finally, in 1994, Sir Michael Tippet, then President of the Peace Pledge Union, unveiled a fine piece of Cumbrian slate in Tavistock Square, near the statue of Gandhi. It is inscribed *to all those who have established and are maintaining the right to refuse to kill. Their foresight and courage give us hope.*

Since 1997, a commemorative event has taken place there each year on 15 May, designated International Conscientious Objector's Day. Increasingly, similar events happen in other cities around Britain. The London gathering is sponsored jointly by the Peace Pledge Union, Amnesty International, Christian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the British Humanist Association and other sympathetic bodies. This year, although steady rain prevented the usual picnic lunch, more than 50 people came together there. We sang Sue Gimurray's song of tribute, ending,

*Look back to those who have dared to be different,  
Over the world let their clear courage flow.  
Army unarmed, let it swell into millions;  
Cry yes to peace with the ones who said No.*

We listened as Norman Kember, World War II CO and recent hostage in the Middle East, explained the difficulties of following one's conscience in a media-driven world. We placed a single white carnation on the memorial stone for each of 70 Objectors in the last half-century from countries around the world, including our own.



Memorial in Tavistock Square, London, dedicated to conscientious objectors. Photo by Mark Barker

Those who have refused to fight in wars deserve to be remembered. Those who take that stand now need our support. And we need to remember them, to increase our own courage and will to peace. If you would like to help with the London gathering or arrange a similar event in your own area, contact Edna Mathieson at [edna.mathieson1@btinternet.com](mailto:edna.mathieson1@btinternet.com); tel: 0207 237 3731.

*The Rev Joy Croft is a retired Unitarian minister.*

## Stay away from arrogant assumptions

*(Continued from previous page)*

about there being nothing and then there was a big explosion when everything came into existence, and then after billions of years, that little speck of matter called the Earth had just the right conditions for life to start, and then after millions more years life developed in such amazing profusion, culminating finally in the incredible mystery of human consciousness? And how all this happened because of a series of accidents? Well, that's the bit I'm having trouble with!

Don't let any doubts like this enter your anti-religious book; it would be fatal. Make sure that you belittle anyone who entertains such ideas, implying that they are intellectual pygmies, or soft-minded fantasists, lacking the courage to accept the bleak and pointless universe you offer to them.

And finally, don't weaken your case by mentioning that there are religious systems which are not based on dogmas or on metaphysical speculation, which are genuinely open to insights from science, literature, philosophy, introspection,

even though you use the work of people who were members of or sympathisers with such groups. So, quote liberally from Thomas Jefferson, as both Dawkins and Hitchens do, without mentioning that he was avowedly a Unitarian in outlook even if he was never a formal member of any Unitarian church.

So there you have it: a recipe for a bestselling anti-religious book. Have a go for yourself. Make a little money. Or maybe not. Perhaps it might be best to save your energies for a book about genuine free thought, unhindered by dogmas of any kind, a book which would not start from the arrogant assumption that certain superior members of the human race ('Brights' as Dawkins call them) have come out of infancy and moved into intellectual adulthood, but from the much more modest – and realistic – assumption that we are all still in our collective intellectual childhood, and that we have a long way to go before we come of age.

*The Rev Bill Darlison is minister at Dublin. This article is from a sermon he delivered there in April.*



# Perhaps the Trinity offers a f

Even Trinitarian Christians don't know fully what it means, but perhaps Unitarians should reclaim the language of the three aspects of the divine says **Michael Killingworth**, 'because God is closer than you think'.

As Unitarians, we like to think of ourselves as heretics – we began as a Christian heresy, and our deep conviction that, as soon as a religious tradition establishes an orthodoxy, it loses contact with the Divine and stops walking its talk is both our brightest blessing and our collective Shadow – for it means that we have to re-invent ourselves in each generation, and there are plenty of signs that it is becoming too much for us. But if there is any point to our preaching tradition, it is surely from the pulpit first and foremost.

I want to commend to you the one heresy that, as Unitarians, we of the free and enquiring religion, we of the open minds and hearts – the one heresy that we will *not* embrace, the one object of Unitarian anathema – I want to suggest to you that you might do well to be Trinitarians.

For if there is one thing that Christians don't know, it's their own Trinitarian doctrine, and what it symbolises. Try asking a Christian how they know when to pray to the Father, when to the Son and when to the Holy Spirit – they'll get very uncomfortable and civility may lead you to want to change the subject ...

As he was turning from boyhood to manhood, Carl Jung famously asked his Calvinist minister father to explain the Trinity. The father shook his head and sadly confessed that he didn't understand it, never had understood it. It's quite possible to see the whole of Jung's career as a search for the meaning of the Trinity, as an attempt to restore his father to wholeness, if only in memory. (Although, of course, there is no "only" when it comes to making memory whole – but that is a different subject altogether.)

## Story-telling is nourishment

I have an old friend who has turned, in the September of his days, to painting murals for Catholic churches. (He's an Italian by ancestry, though born in Lancashire – a delightful and practical man, and if all Catholics were like him, their fantasy of the re-conversion of England might actually stand a chance.) He of course smiles at Jung's father's problem – those Protestants, they don't *understand*. And he's wise enough to know that his own creed doesn't have the full scoop either. His faith, however, knows that story-telling nourishes in a way that the facts of the matter never do, and its heritage is that it tells its story largely through pictures. No atheist has ever feared the Bible, or seen in it a great power for harm, half as much as the Catholic tradition does – and has done for as long as it has been around. Pictures are so much safer – the priest can tell you what you should see in them.

Through my friend, I now have a preliminary grasp of Catholic iconography, of pictures designed to evoke and control a

particular emotional response. But things don't always work out as the powers-that-be would like them to, as I was reminded when I came across one – lying in disgrace in a little-used room attached to a Catholic church. It showed three figures – Christ carrying the cross, and two women, the Virgin Mary and another woman who may have been Mary Magdalen or else Mary's mother, St Anne. It was the Virgin, a cool blonde in a blue robe, who took centre stage – not Christ, who was positioned as though he had only just managed to stagger into the picture from one side. She seemed to have the gift of eternal youth, and I wondered if the panel hadn't been exiled from the church for that very reason – the parish got a new, and I'm told insecure, priest a little while ago: perhaps the Power of the Female was too much for him. (My Catholic friend said it was completely "off message"!)

## Mary as a guide

And, of course, Carl Jung wasn't alone in noticing that Catholics do, in practice, accord Mary more or less equivalent status to the three "proper" figures of the Trinity itself – Maria Stella Maris, Mary Queen of Heaven, and all those other names they have for her – and none of it Biblical in the least – the line between glorification and worship is too subtle for my Protestant soul, or perhaps it's simply that I'm far more interested in what people do than in what they say they do. And underneath those names, there is another, and I will come to her later. For Mary is actually a guide to why it's sometimes said that Christianity is a wonderful religion wasted on Christians.

So what is it that Christians might, if they really took it seriously, gain from the doctrine of the Trinity?

In order to find the answer to that, we need to look not at God but at ourselves, at what it is that people through the ages have sought to find by belief in God – to turn the phrase of Boethius, what *are* the consolations of religion?

I understand the Christian Trinity as offering a representation of three different approaches to God, and claiming that these three represent a full picture of how women and men have sought, and continue to seek, to reconcile themselves to the human condition by entering into a relationship with a power greater than themselves, individually or collectively.

God the Father represents *mythos*. Originally the god or gods of the tribe or, in the case of Athens or Rome, the City – this God was pretty much exhausted two thousand years ago. It was the genius of Paul to suggest that this God, sometimes a creator, sometimes an avenger, and always pretty much inscrutable and in need of mediating angels and godlings, could also be a divinity to whom the individual soul could relate. *Mythos* includes accumulated religious traditions, such as the myths of the Pentateuch and the Jewish hero-kings such as David and Solomon, and their counterparts in every other human culture we have ever heard of. *Mythos* is inescapable, but as Unitarians we don't pay it a lot of attention. This God is too often a *Deus absconditus*, and we seem to relate to it only at a distance: when we are taken up with the beauty of nature, perhaps. Or when we do theology (if we bother to do it all) – it is a God we talk about, it is the aspect of divinity I am relating to now, but only in a distant way. The first person of the Trinity has, in fact, become the third: a God we talk about,



# er way to relate to the divine



Carl Jung wasn't alone in noticing that Catholics do, in practice, accord Mary more or less equivalent status to the three "proper" figures of the Trinity itself. *Madonna and Child, Avignon, Taddeo di Bartolo*

but no longer – because our society generally and our Unitarian tradition in particular is a child of the Enlightenment – no longer a God we can talk *to*. We no longer turn to God for answers which science can give us. And by science, I don't just mean physics and evolutionary theory – although they belong here, too – so much as medicine, and the medical paradigm of psychology.

## God is personified by Christ

But of course we do still want, sometimes, to talk *to* God. We tend to be better at turning to God when we are in distress, confronted with an illness of the body that attacks us, or attacks someone we love – or when we are suddenly confronted with a financial crisis – or when someone to whom we have become attached, or too attached, rejects us.

And this God is personified by the idea of Christ: the defining Western representation of *pathos*. Despite the Muslim tradition, among others, there is no *pathos* in the God of Abraham. *Pathos* has a dim history before the teachings of the Buddha, which reached the Mediterranean world through Alexandria, and which resonated with practitioners of Egyptian mystery religion and also with the influential pagan teacher Plotinus. Whatever name we use – and maybe we use no name at all – it

is the God of Suffering Overcome to whom we speak, if we speak *to* God at all. This is the God who is the object of supplication, to whom we pray, if we do pray, the God who knows what we're going through and who offers the healing power of Love. No small part of our trouble as Unitarians is that we are so wrapped up in talking *about* God that we are strangely reluctant to talk *to* God. One small example: how many of our business meetings begin with a moment of prayer? Shouldn't they all? Talking *to* God is the second person of the Trinity, and it is unmoved – it remains the hinge around which all else turns.

## The possibility of joy, wholeness

For many people, talking *to* God is as close as they dare to get. Yet if we are to renew our Unitarian tradition, becoming more willing to pray will be necessary, but not enough. For prayer need not be an end in itself, but also a gate we may pass through. There is also the possibility of *knowing* God, not, of course in the way that we know how to operate a computer keyboard, or know scientific facts – but the possibility of feeling whole, or at peace, or joyous – there are plenty of metaphors to describe the condition, and it is a feature of language that there can only be metaphors. In early Christian times, this possibility was called *gnosis* – the idea that the purpose of religion was to find the divinity within, the unification of the soul with the Holy Spirit. John called the Spirit *logos*, the Word. Another metaphor, and perhaps the best of them.

We have tended, with our preference for rational religion, to be suspicious of *logos* – it has overtones of cults, of irrational certainty, even of mental health problems. Yet a religious life which excludes the possibility of such "God consciousness" strikes me as a poor thing. If I lived such a life, I should always be in a "one down" position, unable to tell humility from humiliation. Nor do I think such direct spiritual experience needs to be – and indeed, ought not to be – an overwhelming life-changing once-for-all affair such as Paul had on the road to Damascus. For most of us, it is a case of little and often. A mundane word for it might be intuition.

## God is closer than you think

Well, do you trust your intuition? Would you like to trust it more? In scientific terms, it's about freeing up the right side of your brain – and that brings me back to the Catholic fascination with Mary. For there is another iconic figure in western religion who is always female: Sophia, the personification of Wisdom. And she is female because she represents the right brain: the Knowledge that transcends logic and reason, but does not contradict them.

If there is one message which I would like us to promote, it is this: God is closer than you think. God is with you now, and the God within you is always available, if you open yourself up to the experience – through meditation, perhaps, or counting your blessings, or simply experiencing fully whatever is going on inside you at this moment in time – this and no other is the heart of the mystery the Gnostics sought, and the meaning of that wonderful phrase of Julian of Norwich's – all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

*Michael Killingworth is a member of the National Unitarian Fellowship and is a lay preacher in the London District.*



# Penal Affairs Panel seeks activists

The government released new figures in June which broke records for the number of people imprisoned in England and Wales – 83,181 people in custody, a number expected to rise to 95,600 by 2014. **Kate Taylor** says it is time for Unitarians to act.

The point was made at the General Assembly held at Hatfield earlier this year that it is little use our passing resolutions unless they are followed up by action.

The FOY Society motion calling on Her Majesty's Government and the Scottish Executive *to focus more fully on strategies for prevention of crime and for the rehabilitation of offenders and to rely less on often ineffective punishments, such as imprisonment*, demands both massive and prolonged action on our part. It necessitates nothing less than effecting a change in the British culture! Somehow we have to get across the message – so well put by Roger Graef (see story below) when he spoke at the Penal Affairs Panel slot at Hatfield – that prison does not work. We have also to counter the message promoted by most newspapers, supposedly feeding their readers' predilection, that any decision not to impose a custodial sentence is shocking. And we have to articulate wherever possible the Unitarian belief that no one is intrinsically bad and that it is so often cultural circumstances which prompt criminal behaviour.

## Roger Graef may have some answers

**By Tony Rees**

Roger Graef, OBE, filmmaker, broadcaster, author, and far from amateur criminologist treated the Penal Affairs Panel audience to what he termed a conversation. No props, just a quiet American voice which spellbound a sizeable gathering.

Graef involved the audience by asking questions, some of which seemed unconnected with the topic under discussion. Thus, he asked how many present had been victims of crime (most had), following this, only a little later, with how many smoked? Only a sprinkling of malefactors confessed, so he enquired about the number of ex-smokers. This time a forest of hands shot up. He asked what led people to give up.

The commonest answer appeared to be to improve the quality of life in some way, rather than fear of cancer or other disease. Graef's point was that similarly positive reasons accounted for giving up criminal behaviour.

His basic argument, therefore – backed up by both statistics and anecdotes – was that prison was pretty useless as an answer to crime. "Would you lock them (convicted criminals) up in a lavatory with three other similar persons?" he asked, "And if that did not work, would you lock them up for even longer?" He noted that the gross overcrowding of prisons, brought about by tougher judicial sentencing egged on by newspapers like the Daily Mail, resulted in the frequent juggling of prisoners among institutions, thus severely disrupting the few positive, rehabilitative features of prison life, such

The circumstances themselves must be addressed.

So there is much to be done!

The need to change hearts and minds is underlined in a letter which Justice Minister Jack Straw wrote to Tony Cann, the proposer of the Foy Motion, who had sent him a copy of the resolution. 'Applauding the sentiments' of the motion, Straw added, 'One issue is public acceptability and confidence in community disposal'.

The General Assembly's Penal Affairs Panel has made a start. Information about the Criminal Justice System and about Unitarian action will be disseminated in PAP News. Its first issue went out in mid-May to a number of Unitarians who have, in the past, expressed interest in the work of the Panel and asked to be associated with it. It reports the discussion with one of the Panel members, who works in a Young Offenders' Institution, with Sir Suma Chakrabarti about the need for better education in such institutions and for better aftercare in the community.

The FOY Society, and the Panel, are both anxious to find members of Unitarian and Free Christian congregations who would be willing to act as conduits, receiving information about Criminal Justice issues (and perhaps further Social Responsibility ones) and disseminating it to their fellows.

Anyone willing to serve as their congregation's conduit is asked to contact Tony Cann, [tony@airtime.co.uk](mailto:tony@airtime.co.uk)

And anyone who would like to receive a copy of PAP News is invited to contact its editor, Bruce Chilton, [bruce\\_chilton@hotmail.com](mailto:bruce_chilton@hotmail.com)

*Kate Taylor is a member of the Penal Affairs Panel.*

as educational schemes and dramatic productions in which inmates take part.

The speaker commended the opening words of David Waddington's Conservative White Paper of two decades back: "Prison is an expensive way of making bad people worse." The only thing wrong with this, he thought, was the reference to 'bad people'. He himself had trusted young offenders many times, and they had proved themselves trustworthy in return. 'Ordinary citizens' however tended to view prisoners as a race apart. In this context, Graef was very supportive of projects which brought together victims and their relatives with convicted offenders, helping both sides to appreciate that they were dealing with flesh-and-blood individuals.

He also had a lesson for churches, whose congregations, he suggested, did not always practise the forgiveness and goodwill which they were supposed to preach. Schemes informing churches about the imminent release of prisoners in their vicinity, with a view to involving them in their future welfare, sometimes received the response: "People in our church don't want people like that". The Foy Society motion passed at the GA didn't go into detail about these favoured alternatives, but I suggest: consult Roger Graef, he has plenty of ideas.

*The Roger Graef Lecture is available online at at:*

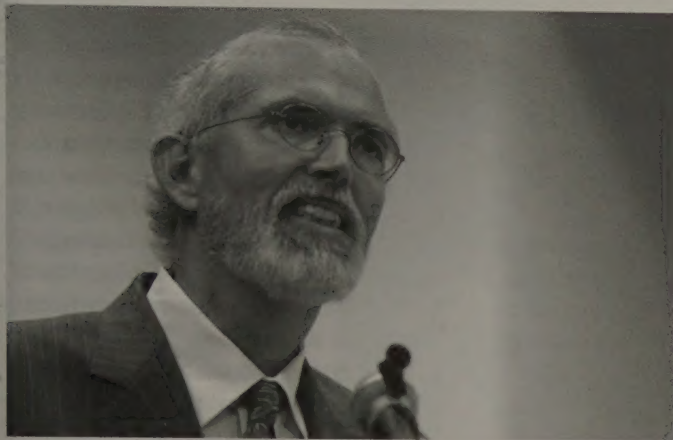
<http://go.podia.net/?c=864>

*or the Q and A session at:* <http://go.podia.net/?c=865>

*or the audio-only version at:* <http://go.podia.net/?c=866>



# UUA General Assembly offered much



The Rev Forrest Church, who is dying of cancer, told the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) GA, 'Death is not life's goal, only life's terminus. The goal is to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for.' Photo by Nancy Pierce/Unitarian Universalist Association

By Maud Robinson

I've spent the last 10 months serving the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Bedford, Massachusetts as Assistant Minister, and rounded out my 'American' year by attending Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA) General Assembly in Fort Lauderdale, Florida from 23-29 June. This is not General Assembly as we in the UK and Ireland know it! For a start, rather than linoleum-floored, shoebox-sized student rooms on a university campus, delegates stayed in plush hotels with shuttle buses taking us to and from the convention centre, where the main auditorium easily seated the several thousand attenders at plenary sessions, and there was no shortage of break-out rooms for the 20 or so simultaneously running events in afternoon programme slots.

In conversation with former UUA President, Rev John Buehrens, I mused about the incongruity of attending meetings about topics such as social and economic justice in such luxurious surroundings. I'm somewhat uneasy with his reasoning that this is an effective way to attract large donors to the UUA. I find Americans' relationship to money extremely interesting – conspicuous consumerism is often balanced with generous philanthropy – but that's a discussion for another day.

With temperatures in the 30s (°C) and 80-90 % relative humidity, Florida in June would certainly not be my chosen location to spend a week for pleasure, and I spent most of the week being shuttled in air-conditioned buses back and forth between air-conditioned hotel and air-conditioned convention centre. However, it was pretty cool to be able to walk out of my hotel right onto the beach and Friday night at midnight found me jumping the warm Floridian waves with a couple of Bedford parishioners – yes indeed, ministering to one's flock can sometimes be an arduous activity.

With so many competing sessions to choose from, each person's GA experience will be very different, and will reflect their own particular interests. In this short article, I can do little more than share a flavour or what I considered to be the highlights, and point readers in the direction of resources where they can find out more.

Ministers' Professional Days on Monday and Tuesday offered workshops and collegial conversations on various aspects of ministry, attended by about 500 ministers. I was particularly

interested in the keynote lecture and subsequent discussion by Old Testament scholar Walter Breuggeman (Emeritus Professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia). He spoke about narrative and covenant as an important grounding for religious faith and understanding, focusing on the power of biblical stories to illuminate social situations, and drawing parallels between the corruption and greed underpinning the political power of the biblical King Solomon and the contemporary political scene in the USA. He was asked to explain his understanding of the canon, which I found particularly interesting. He is entirely open to the idea that revelation is not sealed and that God speaks to the world by many means other than the Christian Bible. Given this position, he was pressed as to why he is such a strong advocate of Biblical preaching. He responded by saying that it is simply a means of maintaining the institution of the Christian Church of which he is a committed member. This line of reasoning speaks to the important debate about plurality of sources in contemporary Unitarian faith and practice. There are those who claim that if we draw from too broad a range of sources, we will do so at the expense of depth in our spiritual practice; it is certainly a danger of which we must be mindful; however, it is not an inevitability. For my own part, I have heard God speaking to me in many different ways. Discernment of truth is difficult and not always certain, but it is the demanding work that our faith calls us to.

At the General Assembly proper, Thursday's highlight for me was the Rev Dr Forrest Church's presentation about his newly published book, *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*. Church has defined religion as "... our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." As he faces his own imminent death from cancer, his theological thinking is put to the test.

On Friday, I was impressed by Eboo Patel – an American Muslim and founder of the Chicago based Interfaith Youth Core, an organisation which trains youth to start up their own interfaith initiatives – check out their website [www.ifyc.org](http://www.ifyc.org). IFYC is partnered with the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, launched in May 2008.

Saving the best for last, Saturday evening saw the auditorium packed for Ware Lecture by Van Jones, and we were not disappointed; it is to be hoped that this visionary and inspirational man will be an important voice in a new American administration after the general elections in November of this year.

Written reviews of all sessions are available on the UUA website, as well as video links to the major presentations, including those by Eboo Patel and Van Jones. [www.uua.org/events/generalassembly/2008](http://www.uua.org/events/generalassembly/2008)

A programme which might be of great practical use to our congregations is *Growing Your Congregation: Marketing and Membership* led by the UUA's Marketing and Outreach Director Valerie Holton. She stated that her PowerPoint and audio presentations would be made available on the UUA's website; That's something to look out for.

Finally I commend to you a quirky and engaging daily blog of the General Assembly by Doug Muder, a parishioner at 'my' church in Bedford MA; it can be found at [www.uua.org/events/generalassembly/2008/gajournal](http://www.uua.org/events/generalassembly/2008/gajournal).

The Rev Maud Robinson is Acting Assistant Minister at First Parish (Unitarian Universalist) at Bedford, Massachusetts.



# Letters to the Editor

## UK cannot accommodate growing number of immigrants

To the Editor:

Although I have attended Cross Street Chapel for nine years, I seem to be at odds with some Unitarian principles. For example: the influx of people from all parts of the globe, under the banner of asylum seekers or sanctuary from political or religious persecution. This country cannot accommodate the ever-growing number of immigrants regardless of their reason for wanting to be here. We need tougher legislation and to be much more selective on the numbers we let in.

**R. Willescroft**  
Manchester

## Where is news of the Executive Committee?

To the Editor:

I have noticed that there have been no summaries of the General Assembly's Executive Committee meetings recently in *The Inquirer* – has there not been a meeting, or has it been decided not to let the readers of *The Inquirer* know what was said/decided?

**Rosemary Ruston**  
Watford

## Hymnbooks available

To the Editor:

The Edmund Kell Church in Southampton has copies of Hymns of Worship to give away. (16 blue, 15 pink), also Hymns of Worship revised (15 copies). Please contact Brenda Knopf on 02380 555333 if you would like them.

**Brenda Knopf**  
Southampton

## Individuals should have more say

To the Editor:

Re: General Assembly meetings voting system

The lack of official response to my earlier letter (*Inquirer*, 3 May) could be taken to infer that the current General Assembly voting system is indeed difficult to justify. The fact remains that the considered opinions of a large number of Unitarian lay members on

a particular constitutional matter can be over-ridden at the GA meeting by a voting system which is heavily weighted in favour of Ministers, Executive Committee members and Honorary Members.

As I understand it, the voting power of a particular fully paid-up lay person in a 'congregation' of 30 or fewer members could be as little as 1/30<sup>th</sup> of that of the associated minister, lay pastor or lay leader. Furthermore, in theory at least, the vote of the congregation could be nullified by its leader or delegate if he or she is so persuaded by emotional or highly eloquent oration at the GA meeting. In times when many lay members find it too expensive to attend or even send a delegate to GA, the opinions of a congregation could be completely ignored in the voting. Writing in a personal capacity, the Rev Alex Bradley (*Inquirer*, 14 June) observes that my complaint about the system relates to the question of authority. He appears to suggest that, because of their calling and particular academic qualifications, our ministers are uniquely entitled to vote as 'custodians of the tradition and guardians of the ethos of our movement' – like Members of Parliament! He even appears to fear that change could have the effect of "diminishing or undermining our vocational ministry". One danger in raising this question is, of course, that some people may interpret it as an attack on our ministry. Nothing could be further from my thoughts. I am merely trying to argue the case for a more meaningful form of democracy within our denomination in a rapidly changing world.

There will continue to be a great need for ministers to service organised religion in our churches and chapels, as well as society in general. But at the same time, for many people in our very diverse, multi-cultural society, there is a great need to expand our spiritual horizons beyond historical boundaries. In a very perceptive article (*Inquirer*, 23 February 2008) the Rev Margaret Kirk observed that for many people "churches have failed to provide spiritual nourishment and the secular world offers little more than the emptiness of consumerism". She

also summarised several important aspects of spirituality which are emerging within Unitarian circles. Amongst other things, she recognised that contemporary spirituality often sits uneasily alongside organised religion, with outward form and God language frequently being dispensed with. "Its content seems to flow seamlessly from experience and discovery and is fuelled by deep dissatisfaction with existing religions and political paradigms". Clearly, Unitarian philosophy is not standing still, and the impetus for change is often coming from within our underrepresented lay membership and fellowships. One of the factors which first drew me to Unitarianism around 50 years ago was its tolerance and its clear understanding that ultimate authority rests with the 'still small voice' within each and every one of us. At a time when Unitarianism is seeking an increase in numbers and in spirit, I, like many others, find the phraseology of our Object and many recent recommendations from the Executive to be unnecessarily prescriptive. Unfortunately, with the current voting system I see little opportunity for influencing this.

**VC Mason**  
Tideswell  
Derbyshire

## Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to [inquirer@btinternet.com](mailto:inquirer@btinternet.com). Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF.

Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes.

Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only, and should not suggest the view expressed is representative of that body.



# Walt Whitman connection is celebrated

By Dennis Crompton

Four days of celebration organised by Jacqueline Dagnall culminated in a special service on Sunday, 1 June at Rivington Unitarian Chapel. This was attended by scholars from USA and England and by members of The Whitman Heritage Group to celebrate the works of Walt Whitman, who could well be described as America's national poet. The theme was 'The Thrush, the Lilac and the Fallen Star' these being symbols that feature in his poetry. Members of the Carpenter Forum also took part in the celebration.

The service also commemorated an extraordinary and unique connection with a group of Bolton admirers, known light-heartedly as 'The Eagle Street College'. Their interest in Whitman coincided with the radicalism of the 1890s. Whitman's English admirers responded to his passionate clarion call for a belief in the universal brotherhood of man and in the importance of nature as a source of spiritual revival. In fact, he is believed to have exerted more influence on workers in the North of England than he did on workers in America. There were links here with Keir Hardy, Robert Blatford, Edward Carpenter and other Independent Labour Party activists and, of course, with some Unitarians.



Walt Whitman -- Library of US Congress photo

It was in the garden of the Manse of Rivington Chapel that the Bolton group fostered their association with Whitman, whom Dr John Johnston and Mr JW Wallace visited for the first time in 1887. A plaque commemorating the connection is set below the great Yew tree in the Chapel grounds.

The links remain. The date of his birthday, 31 May, is still remembered by admirers who can visit Bolton's Library which houses some of the best Whitman memorabilia in existence.

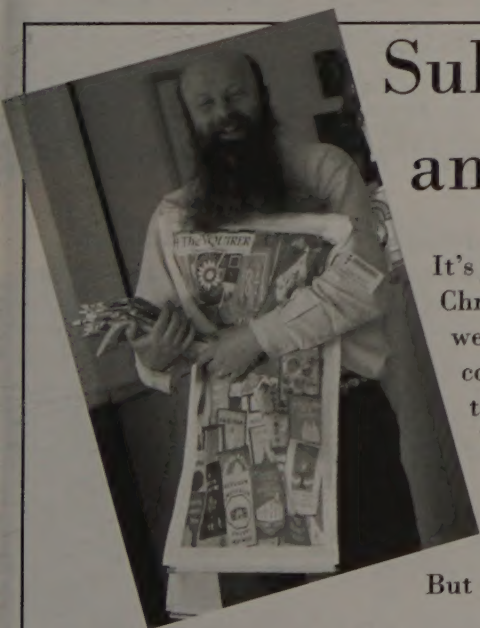
*Dennis Crompton is a member of Rivington Unitarian Chapel.*



American professor Michael Robertson (l) with his recent book 'Worshipping Walt' at the service led by Judith Crompton (centre) with The Clarion Choir. Much of the information comes from Dr Paul Salvesson (r) and from The Whitman Heritage Group.

## Subscribe to *The Inquirer* and get a free tea towel

It's just £24 a year, for the fortnightly news of the Unitarian and Free Christian movement, delivered to your door. And, it arrives on Thursday, well before you can get it at church. (Tea towels will also be sent to any congregations which increase their bundles.) Fill in the coupon and return to *The Inquirer*, c/o John Crosskey, Essex Hall, 1-6 Essex Street, London WC2R 3HY. Please enclose a cheque payable to *The Inquirer* for £24. For that you will receive a year's subscription to *The Inquirer* and a tea-towel – worth £5 – bearing a photograph of many congregations' banners. It's modelled, left, by James Barry, *Inquirer* board member. But you can use it to dry your cups.



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# News in brief

## Women's League weekend at Oxford



Some of the 40-strong Chapel Society congregation who enjoyed the Rev Penny Johnson's service at Oxford in June. Photo by Don Booth

'A Woman in the Ministry' was the subject of the talk given by the Rev Penny Johnson, Women's League President, to Oxford League members and friends when she and her husband Ken joined us for our Women's League Week-end on 7 and 8 June. After Penny's talk about her personal journey into the ministry and experiences as a minister, our hostess Chris Jones provided a real English tea of strawberries and cake at her home in the village of Standlake. Afterwards, the beautiful summer weather provided the opportunity for everyone to spend time enjoying the lovely garden of chapel member Norman Chart (Chris' father, who lives next door).

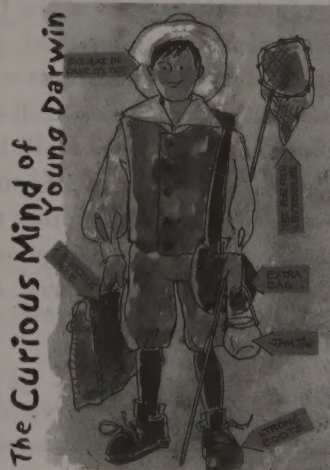
The Sunday service led by Penny took place in The Old Dining Room as access to our beautiful chapel is restricted while major organ restoration work is in progress. Several WL members contributed readings, prayers and new words to a hymn and Penny spoke about the Centenary Year Project Appeal. The collection raised £260 for that appeal, SightSavers International.

— Valerie Walker

## Celebrate Darwin Bicentenary with children

As a young boy, Charles Darwin was a great nature explorer. His Unitarian mother and early educational influences no-doubt fostered a curious mind. A new children's book, *The Curious Mind of Young Darwin*, is being published to encourage young children to explore their local environment through recreating many of the exciting experiments and nature investigations undertaken by him when Charles was a young boy.

The book will take the form of a diary / sketchbook / field study book kept by Charles himself at 8 years of age. It was written to celebrate Darwin's 200th Anniversary by Sara Bel-



lis, Shropshire Wildlife Trust, with Caroline Cook and Jenni Taylor of the Field Studies Council. Co-writer Jenni Taylor is a member of the Unitarian Earth Spirit Network.

The book is designed and illustrated by Lyanne Mitchell, member of Glasgow Unitarian Church. It is published by Field Studies Council Environmental Education. To pre-order your copy or request a review copy, please email: [fscee@field-studies-council.org](mailto:fscee@field-studies-council.org). Publishing date is November 2008. (Special offer: Pre-publishing price £6.95) Age group: approx 7 to 12 years.

## Amnesty event at Golders Green

GA President, Joyce Ashworth, will be paying a visit to Golders Green Unitarians on Saturday, 26 July at 3 pm to take a short service and preside over a meeting focusing on Amnesty International – and in particular, on its important work in defence of women's rights worldwide. A speaker from Amnesty will talk about its campaigns which fight violence against women and will be receiving cheques for Amnesty, the beneficiary of this year's national appeal of the Unitarian Peace Fellowship, of which Joyce herself is a valued committee member and staunch long-time supporter.

The event is being held on a Saturday afternoon in order to allow members of other Unitarian congregations and sympathetic non-Unitarians to attend. We hope that many people will come along to hear and meet Joyce and our Amnesty speaker and support this social justice event in aid of such an important human rights cause.

— Feargus O'Connor

## Ministerial Vacancy

The Joint Ministry of Dunham Road  
Unitarian Chapel, Altrincham  
and Queens Road Free Church,  
Urmston  
Greater Manchester

The two congregations invite applications  
for this post which falls vacant in April  
2009.

After a successful ministry of 20 years, the  
Reverend Celia Midgley  
retires in April 2009 and the joint ministry seeks  
a replacement to lead the two congregations  
This is a full time post with a Parsonage  
available.

Suitably qualified candidates are invited to  
express  
an interest in this ministry by contacting  
Rev Steve Dick, GA Chief Executive  
Officer

by 21 September 2008